

# **How the Religious Concepts of the Afterlife Devalue Human Life**

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The concept of a life after death exists as part of the belief systems of most religions. All three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam make claims of the existence of a life after death either living in eternal bliss or eternal damnation. According to Christian and Islamic religious traditions, after a person's death, they or their soul (or both) is admitted to or forced into some sort of everlasting heaven or hell. Following death, everyone is to be judged by God based on what they did and what beliefs they held while living in this world. According to some Christian traditions, an extra caveat is placed for entry into heaven that a person must also undergo ritual purification (baptism) once in their lifetime. Predating Christianity and Islam, Judaism seems to have several different views about life after death. Some Jewish religious traditions include the concept of everlasting bliss for the good and eternal damnation for the wicked whereas others believe in the life in the Garden of Eden for the Good and either the admission of the wicked into the same garden after purification or complete annihilation from existence.

Similarly, the Zoroastrian concept of afterlife, which heavily influenced the later three Abrahamic religious eschatology, presages a time where every person who ever lived is divided into various different groups based on their lifetime of deeds and conduct. Everyone is then judged in the same way resulting in the good entering eternal bliss unharmed while the wicked suffer for a

period of time before being purified and admitted to the same eternal life of bliss.

The belief system of both Buddhist religious traditions and the traditions of the pantheon of Hindu religions revolve around reincarnation of the soul into different bodies based on a person's conduct during their lifetime. In Buddhism, a person's spiritual efforts during their lifetime can lead them to eventually escape the cycle of birth and rebirth and achieve a higher form of enlightenment, known as nirvana. In the state of nirvana a person after their death exists as an immaterial being or mind. The highest achievement according to Buddhism is achieving nirvana. Hindu religious traditions also talk about reincarnation either into animal form or castes (hierarchical division of people that decide their social status and occupation). The final destination of a person who lives a pious life according to the teachings of the Hindu scriptures is the absorption (moksha) after death of the soul (atman) into the Brahman (infinite soul or God), either as being one with Brahman or as a separate entity.

Taoist religious traditions teach that a person should strive to adhere to a moral life by adhering to the teaching of Tao in order to achieve immortality after death. According to Tao religious teachings the guiding force of the universe is through an energy known as Ch'i or Qi. The aim of individuals who wish to achieve immortality is to live in harmony with Ch'i in order for their souls to achieve union with the universe after death. According to Taoist religious belief, one only achieves true awareness or awakening after death.

What is common among all the various different concepts of afterlife in the above-mentioned religions is the idea that a person should strive to achieve felicity after death. Life in this world is regarded as being less valuable than the one that is supposed to come after death. Life after death is presented as being better and more pleasurable in one form or another as long as a person keeps to the teaching of a particular religious belief. The ultimate goal, according to these religions, is what a person receives or avoids after death. A person's suffering in this world is only a path to or for the purpose of achieving happiness in the afterlife. Pleasures and enjoyments in this world are restricted because according to such religious teachings they are either vices that lead to suffering after death or incomparable to the joy to come in the afterlife.

Religious teachings all have some form of obligations and restrictions regarding a person's personal behaviour as well as their interaction with others. On an individual level, such obligations and restrictions could include anything from coordinating a person's daily activities (such as ritual prayers) to what is permitted to eat, what kind of sexual activities a person can engage in, what a person is allowed to listen to or what kind of desires a person is allowed to have. On a societal level, it could include how the concept of justice is defined, what encompasses a person's rights and obligations and how disputes are to be decided. The sacred teachings of a particular religion form the basis on which its obligations and restrictions are decided.

The Abrahamic religions, as well as Buddhism, the Hindu pantheon and Taoism, all claim to have access to their sacred teachings through some sort of mystical or divine understanding of reality unique only to certain individuals. Such a circumstance leaves the adherents of such religions at the mercy of their prophets and spiritual leaders and their judgment of what is good, appropriate and just and what is bad, inappropriate and against justice. In practice, whether openly admitted or being pragmatic, most religious individuals and scholars of a particular religion adapt to newly found and discovered understandings of the world by adjusting their thinking and practices. But one thing that has remained constant throughout the history of the aforementioned religions has been the idea that divine or spiritual enlightenment has concluded that death is certain and that the life of this world is not as important or worth as much as the life which is supposed to come after death.

The notions that claim the life of this world is not worth as much as the one to come after death, that suffering in this world is not something to complain about as long as it leads to a better afterlife and that restrictions in life (when not justified through rational and scientific means) are meant to bring about some sort of heavenly existence, is the very ideas that undervalue human life.

Before proceeding further into the topic of how such ideas devalue human life, it is important to identify what is not being argued for in this essay. Not every person who adheres to the above-mentioned religions devalues human life. Individuals have different levels of faith and interpretation regarding their religions

and some practitioners of a religious faith might put the life of this world ahead of the promise of an afterlife. The argument is not that the mere fact that a person does not adhere to a religion means that they give value to every human life or that they value human life more than a religious person. In history, there are many secular individuals who caused death on a mass scale.

An argument is not being made against the possibility of some sort of life or existence after physical or bodily death. It may well be rationally or scientifically found that there is the possibility of some kind of existence in some form or another after death or the possibility of being able to achieve such an existence through technological advancement.

Furthermore, a separate essay is needed to discuss the lack of evidence for claims that the threat of eternal damnation or bliss can cause people to adhere to laws and regulations that protect people's rights on a personal and societal level. What would be noted here is that whether or not such a threat can curtail a person's actions and conduct does not lead to the conclusion that what is prescribed by religion also rationally delineates what is or is not good, just or proper. In other words, just because a person might be afraid of going to hell if they eat a certain forbidden food does not mean that from a rational or scientific perspective that food should be avoided.

What is being argued against is the notion that a person can achieve eternal bliss (whether in the form of heaven, nirvana or moksha) or damnation (whether in the form of hell, reincarnation or annihilation) through unjustified claims and ideas of what is just,



good or proper by individuals who either lived in an era with much less understanding of the physical world or claim to have mystical access to some sort of knowledge not accessible to everyone else. Also, what is being refuted is the concept that the main purpose of the life of this world is to strive, through obligations and restrictions that are not rationally and scientifically justified, for a better life that is meant to come after death.

In extreme cases, a person who wholeheartedly believes that their worldly life and that of others is not as valuable as the life to come after death might decide that it is justifiable to give up their own life and those of others to achieve a blissful hereafter. In even more extreme cases, such a person might take practical measures according to their belief. It is not difficult to see why anyone seeking some kind of power would see a benefit in such ideas in order to utilize people to give up their life and take the life of others. Without the ideas that undervalue life in this world and places more value on life that is meant to come after death it would be less likely to convince someone to give up their life or take the life of another and therefore less likely for people to be used as instruments for achieving power. On a less extreme case, a person might assume they are justified in their discrimination of a people who do not adhere to the same religion as them because their life in the hereafter does not have the same worth as theirs.

The idea that suffering, poverty and other forms of misery is either needed for some kind of divine trial or some form of purification convinces individuals to not seek out justice and fairness with regards to their state of life. In more severe cases,

an individual might be convinced that their status in society is due to their gender or because of sins they had committed in a previous life. Those with certain advantages in life due to wealthier or more privileged backgrounds could be made out to have the life they have because of their piety in a previous life.

On an individual level, a person who adheres to restrictions and obligations that are not justified rationally and scientifically devalues the life they are living by placing on themselves unnecessary burdens and suffering and reducing enjoyments and pleasures. Such a person could without rational and scientific justification restrict, according to their particular religious belief, the activities of family members under their care, thereby reducing the quality of life of their respective family members and hence devaluing the life of their family members along with their own.

It should be noted that there might exist numerous texts in scriptures and spiritual teaching of religions that either directly or through some form of interpretation talk about the importance of human life. However, the same religious text that talks about the importance of human life also requires its adherents to strive for the worthier afterlife. The very idea that this worldly life is not as valuable and important as the one to come after death undermines and devalues human life in the here and now by proclaiming it as not being as important.

It could be argued that the concept of striving for an afterlife worthier than the life of this world has impacted humanity in a negative way. Throughout history such ideas have managed to convince individuals in a more disadvantaged life to accept their

state of living while justifying the life of more advantaged individuals. Religious ideas of a worthier afterlife and the way to achieve it have stunted human development in the field of ethics and justice by imposing on people preferences that are not justified rationally and scientifically. Such preferences, usually in the form of obligations and restrictions, have lowered the quality of life for many individuals throughout history and in some circumstances leading to complete destruction and distinguishing of life.

On the other hand, a person who does not believe that the aim of their current life is to strive for the afterlife would view life from a different perspective. If a person believes that they only have one life or that at the very least if there is an afterlife of some sort (even if better than this life) it is no more important than their current one, or that obligations or restrictions not proven rationally and scientifically are not needed to achieve it, then they can be free to make the most of the life they have. They would be less likely to accept injustice or suffering in their current life or accept an unfair status quo. Such a person could potentially choose to act and conduct themselves based on what can be rationally and scientifically proven to be good, proper and just for the sake of providing a good life for themselves and others in this world. They would no longer oblige or restrict themselves based on arbitrary views and opinions.

Rather if the person who is not striving for the afterlife does choose to oblige or restrict themselves, it would be based on what is rationally and scientifically demonstrated to be beneficial, such

as modifying eating habits that lead to a healthier life. Living according to such a view of life would lead to differentiating between what is personal preference versus what is fair, good and proper. Individuals are free to live according to their own preferences rather than the preferences that are justified on the basis of divine or mystical commandments.

## **Addendum**

It is prudent to talk about a point of contention which usually divides the opinions of the religious conservatives and the more liberal leaning views (religious or none religious). The aforementioned point is the argument regarding a woman's right to abortion. An argument might be made that valuing life should mean a woman should not have an abortion once pregnant.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss such a topic in depth. Hence, discussion notes will be mentioned. Several issues need to be addressed in order to evaluate whether or not a woman's right to abortion devalues human life. First, valuing human life also means valuing a person's right to their body and what they want to do or not do with it which in the case of the right to abortion means the woman's right to her body. A woman's body cannot forcibly be used for something or in a way for which she does not give consent. Second, a fertilized egg is not automatically alive after conception. Therefore, it has to be seen at what point it can be determined that a fertilized egg becomes a

living human being. Third, the quality of life of a fertilized egg if left to develop into a living human being has to be considered. The important point to consider is that if legislation is going to be imposed on every person then the discussion regarding abortion should be conducted and a conclusion reached through rational and scientific means and not based on religious views of a group of people about when a fertilised egg is considered a human being.